CHAPTER 7

"Instrument of Nature": The Voice of Michael Jackson

This chapter begins with a brief overview of critical discourse relating to Michael Jackson's voice in terms of reception and recording production. It then explores Jackson's voice in terms of three key definitions: "music," "sound," and "opinion." This exploration begins with Jackson's voice as a component in his musical arrangements, followed by his voice as a sound or utterance produced in his language. Lastly, the chapter discusses "voice" as an expression of Jackson's personal opinions and attitudes, before concluding to focus on a collective definition of Jackson's voice as a crucial way by which he presents his authorial power (agency) and his perspective.

> "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."
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> —1 Corinthians 13:1, *NIV*.

Due to his considerable airplay through the past five decades, Michael Jackson's voice must be one of the most widely recognized of all time. The sound of his voice still permeates the airwaves throughout the globe and continues to be listened to via earphones and speakers, throughout the developed and undeveloped world.[1] The universality of Jackson's voice has interested academics and musicologists alike; as Susan Fast states in *Dangerous*, it is "exquisite to hear his intensity, this intimacy, to hear the human body laboring."[2] However, one of the earliest explorations into the resonance and impact of Jackson's voice was in Barney Hoskyns' 1983 article, "The Boy Who Would Fly: Michael Jackson," republished in 2009 in *The Resistible Demise of Michael*

Jackson.[3] Hoskyns focuses on the rhythmic, disembodied attributes of Jackson's singing voice, particularly on the *Thriller* album, and often describes Jackson's engaging use of vocal expression and its effect on the listener as being on a particularly personal level: "deep in the dark womb of the studio, Michael's voice is a vehicle of fantasy, an instrument ceaselessly running circles around itself, tripping itself up, playing make-believe."[4] For Hoskyns, Jackson's voice is so engaging and has such impact because it becomes an entity of its very own: "It's a voice which starts into every split spare second, stretching like rubber, filling cracks like water. It's not warm or sensual or 'black' but sharp, a squeezing of the throat's aperture, a voice of pure technique. Detaching itself, it gets lost in free flight. Its narcissism is almost not human."[5]

As the previous quote shows, debates surrounding Jackson's voice began long before the track "Speed Demon," which will be discussed in some detail in this chapter. These debates stem from a desire to explain and define, firstly, Jackson's voice, and secondly, its resonant qualities, which, because of their inherent intimacy, draw the listener in. For Hoskyns, certainly, Jackson provides an auditory seduction, "charging these words with the bitterest twists, bending and dragging them, winding vowels round his throat, spitting syllables like darts of poison . . . you can't escape, you're ripped by the voice's current."[6] Hoskyns interprets this inherent seductiveness as directly sexual and Jackson's voice as one that, "at a point of masturbatory orgasm . . . can all but shut out the world," and that, therefore, "to try to engage it in conversation seem[s] absurd, dangerous."[7] What this quote illustrates is the problematic nature of attempting to quantify the resonant qualities of Jackson's use of his voice, and to quantify the complexity of its reception by listeners who are seduced by it and then, of course, are required to rationalize their seduction and pull Jackson's voice into the realm of the unusual. Once Jackson's voice is transported, through any discourse, into the realm of "other," it then traverses easily into the realm of the dangerous and threatening. However, what Hoskyns' article does relate eloquently is the unique experience listeners often have upon first encountering Jackson's voice. Sam Davies echoes the same sentiment, asserting that "Jackson's voice, with its constant appeal to the unspeakable, its recourse to a spasmodic, tic-like, wordless vocabulary, carries the virus which disperses him into inhuman parts."[8]

In other words, Jackson's voice is often of such immense relatability that some critics regard it as entirely separate to the compositions it's part of. Clearly, how we perceive Jackson is inextricably connected to how his voice, and its impact, are received by the listener. How much this is due to Jackson's voice itself, and how much this is due to an idea of Jackson's voice and what it should signify, remain very complex questions. Much of the academic

criticism on Jackson's voice centers predominantly around his earlier adult studio albums, 1979's *Off the Wall*, and 1982's *Thriller*—safe material for analysis, compared to the driven, heady, breathy sounds of *Dangerous* and the prickly synthesized sounds of *Invincible*, rife with technical manipulation and feedback.[9]

Joseph Vogel details his observations of Jackson's sounds succinctly, regarding each song as far more than the sum of its individual vocal parts, driven by the yelps, howls, guttural sounds, grunts, whoops, and screams that make up Jackson's musical vocal expression: "words aren't necessary—the deep emotion is communicated perfectly in his delivery. His voice *is* the music."[10] There is far more that Jackson seeks to reveal to his listeners than words could convey. For some critics, what Jackson is articulating with his voice is the sheer disembodied ecstasy of musical expression, while for others, Jackson's sounds create a sense of musical tapestry, a vocal painting, a splash of further color to punctuate his musical world.[11]

Francesca Royster writes about Jackson's voice in the chapter "Michael Jackson, Queer World Making, and the Trans Erotics of Voice, Gender, and Age" in her monograph *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. Royster presents Jackson's voice as a medium that bends the perceived boundaries between genders and forces audiences to reconsider their prior notions around sexuality. For Royster, a self-attributed "queer" author, Jackson's *Off the Wall* was "a soundtrack for those [queer] desires which were floating around . . . for which I didn't have a name."[12] Royster assigned Jackson a "third sex" as early as 2005, the original publication date for her "Michael Jackson and the Transgendered Erotics of Voice," and she argued that the very act of using the throat to evoke sounds is inherently sexual, throats being "part of the erotic act."[13] However, what this chapter is more readily concerned with is Jackson's voice in relation not only to music and intimacy, but to meaning. Jackson's vocal performances are almost certainly far more than the sum of their parts, and the example we will consult as a case in point will be the track "Speed Demon" from Jackson's 1987 album *Bad*.

The reason for choosing this track is because "Speed Demon" (1987) is an example from the mid-part of Jackson's career, following his work on the 1979 *Off The Wall* and 1982 *Thriller*, where his vocal performances may be argued to be more concerned with audience and playability. The song also precedes a lyrical focus on false representation and slander in the albums *HIStory: Past, Present, and Future, Book 1* and *Blood on the Dance Floor: HIStory in the Mix*. Several other chapters in this book focus on *Dangerous* and *Invincible*, so it would be superfluous to focus on them again here.[14]

VOICE AS MUSIC

"Speed Demon" demonstrates Jackson's uncanny ability to showcase several parts of his vocal repertoire within his delivery of a song. The first definition of "voice" is as a vocal part in a composition. Within the first 10 seconds of the song's opening, which begins with the thrumming of an engine, Jackson's voice forms a "chuh" sound, a cross between a yelp and a grunt, which is immediately interlaced with the sound of Jackson breathing in unison with the engine's rhythm. Jackson's breath, and his rough intake of breath, become one with the pounding of a synth drum, as he begins the first line.[15] The vocal performance that continues in the chorus traverses the line between singing and speaking.

Jackson moves between the voice as a vocal part (a changing element of tone) and the voice as part of the instrumentals of the track, and he does so especially in terms of manipulating high and low pitch. During the hook and its repetition of the word "speeding," Jackson repeats the line "pull over boy." He stays in the lower part of his register, breath-singing his words, and this way his breath remains part of the song's instrumental. In the second part of the hook, where Jackson sings, he uses the falsetto register: "in the falsetto tradition there can be tremendous power, as well as vulnerability . . . a crack in the macho posture, the expression of need."[16] Jackson's voice also serves to create multiples of himself within this track and several others in his work. These multiples, stacked Jackson voices that often form his choruses, also provide a sense drama. Their dramatic function serves to give a rise in tension; they lift the dramatic stakes, and they provide depth. Simultaneously, Jackson's voice reaches new levels of expression, and when he crescendos the word "speeding" and repeats himself, he includes new nuances in every repetition, culminating in the final bars with yelping and grunting.

Jackson's vocal expression forces us to reconsider the relationship between vocal utterances and their meaning. The song seems to have far little to do with its semantics, and far more to do with the aural expression found in its vocal harmonies. The clue to this is in the driving progression of rhythms that originally serve to accentuate and highlight Jackson's voice. There is clearly a race on here, but who are the contestants, and is there truly a prize? Jackson's sound identifies with the rush of moving very quickly, and of being in control by being out of control.

MUSIC AS SOUND

Jackson's vocal expression can also be interpreted in terms of a "sound produced in a person's language" (*OED*), articulations that are made through their ability to sing. In "Speed Demon," Jackson articulates on many levels.

He utters the main verses, which use the first-person perspective ("**my** mind"); and he also articulates from another perspective, using the second person, which argues that he could be saving his own life by slowing down, to which Jackson replies that every moment will be lived as if it is the last.[17] Jackson is clearly demonstrating a desire and an ability to both speak and sing, but in doing so he is clearly developing something far more profound. The song is not explicit about the characters to whom it refers (for example, to whom we can attribute "pull over boy").[18] On one level, Jackson's voice provides his distinctive tone and style. However, in another, more literary sense, in which voice describes an author's unique style or flair, Jackson conveys his in his use of syncopated rhythms, a layered chorus, and a considerable range of pitches and tones. His use of multiple perspectives, in choruses, verses, and hooks, and, of course, in his use of synthesizers and found sounds and vocal sounds, which are incorporated into the main composition seamlessly. A voice is also a marker of what, who, and where we are—a means of identifying us. By the time of the *Bad* album, Jackson no longer relies on the "hee-hee" and "whoo" signatures, but he does give out one deep "whoo" scream toward the end of the track, as if he cannot quite contain the ecstasy of, or at least the energy within, the song's interactions.

For Royster, "through his cries, whispers, groans, whines, and grunts, Jackson . . . often undercuts his audience's expectations of erotic identification."[19] Jackson's breathy execution in many of his songs, the yelps and sighs, and the layering of breaths (both short and long), can contribute to a definition of what Jackson's unique vocal expression is, and can help us discover how we can distinguish his songs as entirely different and separate from the songs of other musicians and recording artists.

MUSIC AS OPINION

Continuing in the vein of Jackson's vocal expressions having a flair and flourish that make them distinctive to listeners, Royster also addresses "the power and dangerousness of Jackson's ability to make longing speak, and his ability to make it move across contexts and desires."[20] Jackson certainly makes longing speak in this track.[21] However, "voice," in terms of the expression of a particular opinion or attitude, is cloudy at best in "Speed Demon," as it is in so many of Jackson's songs where he relies heavily on analogy, allegory, and metaphor to express a wide range of meanings to his audience.

The first meaning Jackson may be expressing here is that of being a superstar, on the very edge, especially in terms of touring, flying from place to place, moving at breakneck speed, dancing on stage after stage on world tours, and being unstoppable. Even Jackson's severe burns in 1984 did not keep him

down for more than a few weeks. Adrian Grant's *Visual Documentary* provides an excellent overview of Jackson's movements in the four years preceding "Speed Demon," and he truly was traveling the entire world on a grueling schedule of engagements, award ceremonies, performances, benefits, and recording commitments.[22] The sheer number of dates serve to illustrate Jackson's momentum, which may well have resulted in his feeling that he had been catapulted into his own life. Those who ask him to "pull over" are perhaps Jackson's detractors, commanding him to stop doing so well, stop earning so much money, and stop winning so many awards. To the detractors, Jackson gives the reply: There is no slowing down and no pulling over.

Another interpretation of "Speed Demon" examines the treatment and mistreatment of black men and women at the hands of the American police, news that has been in the mainstream press several times, like pulling over black people for alleged speeding offenses, and some events that have even resulted in violent beatings. This shameful, but longstanding, part of American culture, made iconic by the videoing of crimes such as the beating of Rodney King, blurs the line between reality and Jackson's inner visions, and it is reiterated by the short film for the song "Speed Demon," included in the *Moonwalker* anthology. The short film further underscores the words and helps us understand their meaning more fully. During "Speed Demon" Jackson morphs into several individuals, some of whom are famous, some who are not. In this short film, he is speeding away from hordes of fans, made, like him, of plasticine, in a claymation animation. Jackson escapes by disguising himself in rabbit costume, but fans hound him mercilessly until he flies away from them using a jetpack to launch himself into the sky, soaring into the heavens and into freedom.[23] Jackson speeds away from all those who have chased him and pursued him in a bid to get something from him, a chase that results in his escape. However, when he does escape he is accosted by a police officer for his "autograph," and when he claims that he was dancing with his friend, Spike, who morphs into reality after Jackson removes his costume and turns himself back from clay to human, the bunny has disappeared and Jackson is left alone. However, the word "boy" is reminiscent of the racist contingent that wishes to pull Jackson back and forces him to pay for going so fast and so far. He is not permitted to run, or, if he does so, he is constantly being told to get a ticket in order to continue on his way. At no point in the track does Jackson acknowledge his speeding as a crime for which he must atone. The concept of speed in this track may also well be an existential question; Jackson must speed because time is running out for him. What "Speed Demon" articulates most emphatically is a necessity to run with intense and immense speed and to escape a situation. It expresses a desire to run faster than those who give chase and to become a being who can always move fast

enough to make their escape permanent. This notion of speeding is not leisurely, nor is it a result of hedonistic self-aggrandizing. Jackson is running for his life.

To conclude, in Jackson's case, the voice is not simply a single component in a musical composition; rather, it is like paint, which Jackson can and does apply in several colors through each composition. Often, the effect forms a cloud of meanings, ambiguous enough to leave listeners with a sense of deep emotional connection, sometimes a sense of urgency, immediacy, pleasure, or pain. Jackson's use of vocal expression is entirely unique, and it produces a highly distinctive tone and style in all of his songs, which helps the artist to express his own agency and perspective further. These opinions are often dressed beautifully by Jackson's flourishes, causing his voice to occupy Royster's "third space," totally free of gender but imbued with a great amount of meaning. Not only does Jackson have a voice like no other; he also uses it to express himself like an instrument of nature itself. Jackson uses his voice to convey narrative sentiment with a myriad of shrieks, whoops, guttural, and nonverbal sounds that are interpreted as a form of physical, life energy that Jackson uses in a form of vocal sculpture.

This chapter has presented a way of approaching Jackson's music in the light of his unique use of voice and vocal expression, presenting the three components of Jackson's voice as music, sound, and opinion. Jackson's use of voice creates a series of colors in an aural palette. These colors, through Jackson's use of vocal sculpture, breath, shrieks, whoops, and all his utterances, are integral components of Jackson's unique style. They are tools only he could wield, and they stamped his ownership mark on all of his work.